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ABSTRACT

The use of imitation as a language learning strategy was explored in a case study of a child in a Mandarin-speaking family. Recordings were made over the course of 3 months, from the ages of 2 years 10 months to 3 years 1 month. It is argued that restrictive criteria regarding identity of form and temporal proximity of utterances have severely limited the data on use of imitation and distorted evaluations of the imitative process. As a result, imitation has been viewed as an unimportant part of the language learning process. The case study provides examples of the usefulness of imitation under a broader definition and shows imitation to be a continual learning strategy of variable potency. Recordings of the telling of a story without text were analyzed for instances of non-exact and deferred spontaneous imitations as opposed to immediate and exact imitations. The examples demonstrate that a broader definition of imitation provides significant evidence of imitation as an ongoing language learning stragegy. Transcriptions of speech samples and references are appended. (RW)

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IMITATION AS A LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY: EVIDENCE FROM A CHINESE CHILD*

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This is a case study of an only girl-child from the ages of 2;10 to 3;1 in a Mandarin-speaking family. When the study began, the family had been in the U.S. for about two years. The father was a student and the mother a housewife. I visited the child's home approximately once a week for about two hours of taping per session. The mother also made tapes in my absence.

Early in the study, the child's abundant use of imitation piqued my interest. Among the Chinese, who value memorization as a learning technique, imitation is viewed as a display of the child's good memory and is encouraged, particularly through performance routines such as song-singing and recitation. This study focusses on imitation in the context of book-reading, which can be classed as a kind of performance routine which allows for linguistic variety on the part of the performer.

In the literature on imitation, we find contradictory conclusions concerning its role in language acquisition. I know of no-one who does not accept the notion that imitation can be useful in learning lexical forms. The controversy revolves around the usefulness of imitation for learning sentence structure, i.e., the patterns of cooccurrence of lexical items. In discussing this issue, Moerk and Moerk (1979:49, 70-71) use the terms progressiveness and productiveness. Progressiveness refers to whether the child's imitations are more complex or more correct in terms of the adult model than her spontaneous (novel) productions. Productiveness focusses on short- and long-term impact of model utterances repeated by the child in terms of their leading to more advanced spontaneous constructions. Until recently, the prevailing view has been that imitation is a non-progressive, non-productive way station on the road of acquisition. A more recent position is that imitation is a continual strategy of variable potency for those who use it. I take the latter position.

As pointed out by Snow (1981a:205-6), Moerk and Moerk (44-45, 69), and Ochs-Keenan (1977:127), differences in conclusions about the role of imitation are at least partially due to the employment of different operating definitions of what counts as imitation. Definitions used by a number of researchers have included only those formally exact or reduced repetitions that follow the model immediately or within a few utterances and within the next speaking turn; (see Ramer 1976:703; Bloom, et al. 1974:383; Ervin 1964:168-9.) Thus, the criteria of identity of form and temporal proximity are treated as crucial in selecting utterances counted

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as imitations, thereby severely limiting the data and, perhaps, consequently distorting evaluation of the imitative process.

In contrast, Snow (1981a; 1981b), Moerk and Moerk, and Clark (1977; 1978) have focussed on imitations which can be conveniently labelled "expanded imitations". They do not restrict the definition of imitation to include only exact or reduced imitations. These researchers have also accepted as imitations utterances which are based on antecedents more than a few utterances distant, thereby further broadening the definition of imitation. Clark (1977:342) points out that the "apparent decline in the frequency of imitations as children grow older, ... may just be an increase in delayed imitation." It is the broad definition of imitation which I employ in this study.

In the analysis of the data which follows, we will come face-to-face with the question of how we can tell if we are dealing with imitation or with a spontaneous utterance in some cases. Of course, we can never be 100% sure. But we can place each imitative candidate on a scale of probability based not on a mechanistic count of the features which the "imitation" has in common with the model, but on the weight of these features in the context of the interaction as well as in the context of the linguistic behavior patterns of the individual child under consideration. Furthermore, imitations and novel utterances are not mutually exclusive opposites but can rather be found on a continuum of utterances with no well-defined line marking where one type of utterance leaves off and the other begins. There is an area which shifts with age where these two types of utterances shade into each other. It is in this area that the most controversial and some of the most interesting data are found.

The data discussed here are from three tellings of a story book without text. I will focus on non-exact and deferred spontaneous (non-elicited) imitations. The label non-exact includes reductions (extractions), extractions with substitution, and various kinds of expansions. Where appropriate, I will point out how the mother's expectations for the child are reflected in her use of "scaffolding" as a linguistic aid (Bruner 1978:254).

In the first book-reading event, the child produced 100 imitations within 120 speech turns. Ninety of these were spontaneous, approximately 25% of which were exact. This is a higher percentage than is found in non-performance routine data, indicating that the event type influences the imitation type and that performance routines in some sense encourage the use of imitation. Of the remaining non-exact imitations, approximately 50% were responses to questions.

Questions represent a particular context in which production is expected of the child. In Chinese, most questions can be answered by either simple extraction from the question model (yes-no type questions) or extraction with substitution (most wh-

questions). Within the context of Chinese, then, the strategy of basing the form of a response on that of the question proves to be a highly successful one, and is one which this child employs regularly. However, it can be misapplied, as shown in Example 1 (Appendix).

In Example 1, the child incorrectly employs repetition of the question phrase in her response (1.2) in trying to answer the cognitively and linguistically difficult question "What happen?" (1.1). In 1.3, the mother lends support by expanding the question into one with which the child can employ the strategy of imitation with substitution. The child does so, replacing the question phrase *zěnma yàng* 'what happen?' with the predicate phrase *dǎ tā* 'hit it'. Note that the child leaves out the cognitvely difficult adverbial, *yǐ-hòu* 'after'. Her response (1.4) is not acceptable to native speakers I checked with although her mother does not correct her.

Example 2 (Appendix) shows the complex development of structure in deferred imitations. Throughout this example, we see the mother providing the child with linguistic support as well as a model for the process of imitating (Folger and Chapman 1978). The entire example demonstrates the role of imitation in the cooperative building of communicative interactions by the mother and child. 2.1-2 were uttered by the child one week prior to the first telling of the book while the child was talking about a near-drowning experience she had had. The drowning experience is a topic which comes up regularly in mother-child conversations and is well-rehearsed. In this example, we will see how the child draws on linguistic knowledge acquired in talking about a personal experience and applies it appropriately to a new context. (Conversely, she also uses expressions from performance routines in spontaneous conversations. These are called "quotations" by Moerk and Moerk.)

In 2.3 (Telling-1), the mother asks the child a "how?" question. Note that verbal modification, which is required to answer such a question, does not typically appear in the child's spontaneous speech. In trying to answer the question in 2.6, the child is cued by the mother's reference to *shǔi* 'water' in 2.4 and produces a sentence identical to her own utterance of a week previous (2.2). In 2.8, she juxtaposes the mother's 2.5 with 2.6, thereby more completely answering the mother's question. In 2.9, perhaps prompted by her own 2.8, she couples 2.1 with 2.2.

In response to the open-ended question "What happen?" in 2.11 (Telling-2), the child produces 2.12, which is modelled on the mother's 2.5 of Telling-1 (imitated by the child in 2.8). Note, however, the substitution of *jìn* 'enter' with *xià* 'down', from the child's own previous utterances 2.9 and 2.1. Recall that the child had difficulty with this kind of question in Example 1 above

when it was presented in Telling-1 without any model on which to base her response. Furthermore, her use of three verbs in a series represents advancement. In spontaneous speech she typically uses only limited pairs of verbs in complex constructions.

In 2.13, the mother again introduces *shǔi* 'water' into the context which prompts the child to produce 2.14, harkening back to her own 2.6 and 2.2 and returning her to her drowning experience, as in Telling-1 (2.14). In the first telling, she did not use the first person pronoun but attributed her experience to the character in the book (2.6, 2.8, 2.9). In 2.10, it is the mother who overtly refers to the child within the context of the book-reading event when she says "Oh, you also ...." In 2.15 of Telling-2, the child follows this model and overtly refers to herself, saying "I also ...." The phrase *dào lǐ-miàn qù* 'arrive inside go' harkens back to 2.4. However, it is 2.13 which seems to be the direct prompt for 2.15, acting as a "memory stimulator" for the child. This phenomenon is also noted by Moerk and Moerk (47), who use the term "memory help" or "releaser".

In Telling-1 of Example 3 (Appendix), the child gives a grammatically and informationally unsatisfactory answer to a question (3.3). Note that the structure, though not the lexical form, of her answer is modelled on that of the question, resulting in the inappropriate use of "do". This misusage does not occur in her spontaneous speech. The child is corrected in 3.4 and repeats the correction (3.5). In Telling-2, she uses the pattern with the aspect-marking auxiliary verb *zài* 'be at' from 3.4 in her unprompted description of the same page in the book (3.6, 3.7). The child does not regularly use aspect marking other than the completive particle *le* in her spontaneous speech.

Example 4 (Appendix) shows the development of the story opening over time. In Telling-1, the mother does all the talking--the child has not yet begun to participate. The mother's use of the verb *zhuā* 'grasp/catch' suits the net-fishing situation. In Telling-2, the mother simply begins by asking a question about what the boy is going to do with the fish net (4.4) and expects the child to be able to respond appropriately. However, the child's response (4.5) inappropriately uses the verb *diào* 'catch (fish with hook and line)'. The common expression *diào-yǔ* 'catch fish' is equivalent to the English "fishing". So the child, cued by the mother's use of "fish net" in 4.4, remembers the boy is going fishing and she supplies the more common expression as an answer, leaving out the verb *qù* 'go', as the mother also did in 4.1 and 4.3. In 4.6, the mother supplies the desired answer using *qù zhuā* 'go catch'. In Telling-3, the mother opens with the general question "What's he going to do?" (4.7) and the child is ready with the desired answer (4.8), modelled on the mother's line 4.6 of Telling-2.

Example 5 (Appendix) should be considered along with Example 4 since the same expression "go catch something" is involved. Example 5 is from later in the story. By the time the child utters the phrase *qù zhuā* 'go catch' in 5.4 of Telling-3, she has not only heard it in 5.1 (imitating in 5.2), but also in 4.6 (imitating in 4.8) and in 4.2. Note that the precise phrase *tā-men qù zhuā* 'they go catch' appears in 4.6. Line 5.4 incorporates "they go catch" into the format supplied in the immediately preceding question (5.3) *rán-hòu le?* 'then?', demonstrating how the child is able to use two separate utterances to build a novel sentence through the use of incorporation. Finally, the child produces 5.6, which, except for the substitution of a new Object, is an exact imitation of the mother's 4.6, demonstrating how the child is able to employ what she has heard in a previous telling in a different but appropriate context.

These five examples support the idea that by our mechanistically employing a narrow operating definition of imitation in the past, we have missed a large and significant body of data on imitation. It is in precisely these new kinds of data recently being brought to light that we need to look for evidence of imitation being used as an ongoing language learning strategy.

I would like to conclude by making the point that although we may find the clearest evidence for imitation as a language learning strategy in ideal situations such as the one described here, we should not assume that lack of overt production of imitations means that the imitative process is not present. A child may silently employ the same imitative strategies described here and in other works and we would have no hard linguistic data to indicate that such was actually the case. So lack of imitative utterances in a child's speech proves nothing about the absence or presence of the imitative process. Therefore, I suggest that imitation is a potential language learning strategy for all children. The task remains for us to employ the broad operating definition of imitation in studies of a variety of children acquiring different types of languages in different environments. In this way, we will come to appreciate more fully the place of imitation in language acquisition.

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APPENDIX: In all examples, underlining indicates a model and boxing an imitative utterance.

EXAMPLE 1

1.1 M: *Rán-hòu tā pǎo, pǎo a; zěnma yàng ?*
then he run run PTCL how appear (Then he runs, runs; and what happens?)

1.2 C: *Zěnma yàng dǎ tā.*
what happen hit it (What happen he hit it.)

1.3 M: *Nǐ kàn tā zhè-lǐ. Tā pǎo-de yǐ-hòu zěnma yàng ?*
you look him here he run after what happen (Look at him here. After he runs, what happens?)

1.4 C: *Tā pǎo-de dǎ tā.*
he run hit it (He runs and hits it.)

EXAMPLE 2

Conversation 10/9/81

2.1 C: *Wǒ xià qù ... qù yóu-yǒng ....*
I down go go swim (I went down to go swimming.)

2.2 C: *... hē shuǐ le.*
drink water PTCL (I swallowed water.)

Telling-1 10/16/81

2.3 M: *Tā diào dào zěnma lǐ-miàn qù a?*
he fall arrive how inside go PTCL (How does he fall in?)

2.4 M: *dào shuǐ lǐ-miàn qù la!*
arrive water inside go PTCL (He goes into the water!)

2.5 M: *Tā diào jìn qù la!*
he fall enter go PTCL (He falls in!)

2.6 C: *Tā hē shuǐ. la.*
he drink water PTCL (He swallows water.)

2.7 M: *Tā hē shuǐ le. Duì!* (He swallows water. Right!)

2.8 C: *Tā diào jìn qù a! hē shuǐ. le.*
he fall enter go PTCL drink water PTCL (He falls in. He swallows water.)

2.9 C: *Tā xià qù qù yóu-yǒng hē shuǐ le.*
he down go go swim drink water PTCL (He goes down to go swimming and swallows water.)

2.10 M: *Oh, nǐ yě yóu-yǒng hē shuǐ a.*
you also swim drink water PTCL (Oh, you also went swimming and swallowed water.)

Telling-2 10/19/81

2.11 M: *Tā zěnma yàng?*
he what happen (What happens to him?)

2.12 C: *Tā diào xià qù le.*
he fall down go PTCL (He falls down.)

2.13 M: *Diào dào shuǐ-lǐ qù le.*
fall arrive water-in go PTCL (He falls into the water.)

2.14 C: *Tā hē shuǐ.*
he drink water (He swallows water.)

2.15 C: *Wǒ yě dào lǐ-miàn qù.*
I also arrive inside go (I also go in.)

2.16 M: *Nǐ yě diào dào lǐ-miàn qù le.*
you also fall arrive inside go PTCL (You also fell in.)

EXAMPLE 3

Telling-1 10/16/81

3.1 H: *Zhèi gē-gē gēn gōu-gǒu gàn shénma?*
this boy with doggy do what (What are the boy and the dog doing?)

3.2 H: *Tā* *gàn -ma?*
he do what (What's he doing?)

3.3 C: *Tā-men* *zuò shuā -yá.*
they do brush teeth (They're doing brushing their teeth.)

3.4 H: *Tā-men zài* *xǐ - zǎo!*
they be at wash soap (They're bathing!)

3.5 C: *Tā-men zài* *xǐ - zǎo!* (They're bathing!)

Telling-2 10/19/81

3.6 C: *Tā-men zài* *shuā -yá.*
they be at brush teeth (They're brushing their teeth.)

3.7 C: *Tā-men zài* *xǐ -tóu.*
they be at wash head (They're washing their hair.)

EXAMPLE 4

Telling-1 10/16/81

4.1 H: *Tā* *ná* *zhèi-ge* *wǎng* *zhuā* *yú.*
he take this net grasp/catch fish (He takes this net to catch fish.)

4.2 H: *qù zhuā* *yú.*
go catch fish (He's going fishing.) or (To go catch fish.)

4.3 H: *Yǒu méi yǒu* *zhuā* *yú ?*
have not have catch fish (Isn't he fishing?)

Telling-2 10/19/81

4.4 H: *Tā* *ná* *yú* *wǎng* *qù* *gàn* *shénma ?*
he take fish net go do what (What is he taking a fish net to go do?)

4.5 C: *Tā* *diào - yú.*
he catch fish (He's fishing.)

4.6 H: *Tā-men* *qù zhuā* *yú.*
they go catch fish (They're going fishing.)

Telling-3 11/17/81

4.7 H: *Tā* *qù gàn* *shénma ?*
he go to what (What's he going to do?)

4.8 C: *Tā* *qù zhuā* *yú.*
he go catch fish (He's going fishing.)

EXAMPLE 5

Telling-1 10/16/81

5.1 H: *Tā yào qù* *zhuā* *qīng-wā.*
he want go catch frog (He wants to catch a frog.)

5.2 C: *Tā yào qù* *zhuā* *qīng-wā.* (He wants to catch a frog.)

Telling-3 11/17/81

5.3 H: *Rán-hòu* *le?*
then PTCL (And then?)

5.4 C: *Rán-hòu* *tā-men qù* *zhuā* *le* *zhèi-ge ... Zhèi shénma?*
then they go catch PTCL this this what (Then they go to catch this... What's this?)

5.5 H: *qīng-wā.* (A frog.)

5.6 C: *Tā-men qù* *zhuā* *qīng-wā.*
they go catch frog (They go to catch a frog.)

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